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BRITAIN, INDIA  
AND DR. BESANT

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GEORGE S. ARUNDALE



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By  
George S. Arundale

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## **BRITAIN, INDIA AND DR. BESANT**

MANY, many years ago, very early in 1903 to be precise, I came to India on the invitation of Mrs. Annie Besant, whom I had met a year earlier for the first time in this incarnation and had at once recognized as my leader-to-be for the future.

### **DEDICATION TO INDIA'S REGENERATION**

Dedicated as she was to India's regeneration, she inspired me, as

also countless thousands, to a similar, though far humbler, dedication; and my intimate contact with the youth of India from the very beginning of my life in this country laid the foundations of what was to be a lifelong calling.

For in these young citizens of an age-old country I could perceive, from the very beginning of my association with them, the most splendid material for the building of the free nation that is ordained to be. And it was not long, therefore, before I knew I had two Motherlands—Britain the land of my physical re-birth, India the land of my spiritual re-birth.

With India thus looming so large in my earlier years—even as a student at Cambridge University she was already very dear to me—I grew to be, I fear, less close to Britain, but supremely close to India.

I came to love her many faiths, her mighty past, her incomparable philosophies and sciences, her unique political and educational systems, so fraught with meaning for the modern world, her wonderful architecture and painting. It was not until recently, under the influence of Rukmini Devi, that I began to understand and to appreciate her no less wonderful music and

rhythm through the science of dancing.

And I was thrilled to realize that all these glorious treasures were once again to shine forth in India's new setting in the modern world.

Fortunate indeed I was to live, almost year in and year out for thirty years, under the strong yet tender guidance of one who had become for me, as soon as I had met her in London, my spiritual mother; so that, as I had two Motherlands, so had I two mothers, and so have I both today.

Without Dr. Besant, even the little service I may have been able to give could not have been

accomplished. Without her, the great happiness I have enjoyed, and still enjoy, could not have come to me as it has come. Without her, I could not be looking forward into the future with the most eager anticipation and confidence, and in the certainty that, as I have served her in past lives and in the present life, I shall serve her in the lives to come.

Thus was it that India became my beloved, and has remained such ever since, and will so remain far, far beyond the end of my present life.

I became passionately eager that her glories—dim, I fear, today—

shall again shine in all their brilliance in her—to her own well-being and to the admiration and, I hope, the emulation of the whole world.

I caught a little of the Heavenly fire of my leader as she strove night and day in all the power of her genius, and under the constant guidance and blessing of her Elders, the Masters of the Wisdom, to claim, to demand, India's rightful place among the nations of the world with an ardour none others could in any wise emulate.

She was one of the greater heroic figures of her age, and the time will come when her knightly valour will be a mighty legend in her India,

and she will be known as a Heaven-sent Messenger to call the India of the nineteenth century and beyond to an awakening into a new and splendid life.

#### **DR. BESANT'S WORK CONTINUES**

Blessed indeed am I to have been allowed a little part in her mission to India and to the world, to have been allowed to be near her, to give her all the devotion I had to offer, and to receive from her, as so many received from her, a most gracious and a most precious affection.

And I am supremely thankful that her inspiration remains with me, even though she be no longer

in physical incarnation. I feel her as near to me as ever, but still more do I feel that the leadership she gave to India while on earth still continues as virile as ever, is indeed a leadership greater even than that of the physical plane.

I have no doubt whatever that she still pursues the same policy with which she electrified the country, and which, at a particular juncture, resulted in her internment because the Government of Madras was totally unable to understand that in working for India's freedom in the way in which she did she was working for Britain's freedom no less.



I have no doubt that she is still inspiring the people of India to claim their rightful place in the great Commonwealth of Nations to which they already belong, and that she is doing all she can to guard them from being led into that violence which would be dishonourable to India, injurious to the Indo-British Commonwealth, and prove a setback to the world little less disastrous than the effects of the present world-war.

So do I, in my small way, strive to stand, upholding the Besant tradition as strongly as I can. I have not a tithe of her scintillating equipment. But I must hope that

even every little helps, and I do indeed hope that she knows me to be loyal to those great principles which I so deeply admired and cherished as she gave them forth in mighty writings and gorgeous oratory, and which I think I value still more highly now.

### OPPORTUNITIES LOST

I must confess that now and again my feelings and my longing for certain eventualities to take place send me into the use of language, oral or written, stronger, perhaps, than the occasion warrants.

Whenever a pronouncement comes from authoritative quarters,

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as, for example, from the Viceroy or from His Majesty's Government, and it seems to me to fall far short of what the pronouncement might have been, I confess I become impatient, for undoubtedly I am an impatient idealist. I think I know what the terms of the pronouncement might have been, and how such terms might have produced an almost miraculous effect; and I compare such terms with the hard, cold, prosaic, and most unsatisfying phraseology in which the pronouncement is actually couched.

Especially in these times, when every moment is precious, and

every delay dangerous, I sometimes feel aghast at the opportunities missed, and at the way in which the warnings of great personages are ignored. I sometimes feel desperate about it, for I know how immense the change would be in India, in Britain, and between the two great lands, were there even only a modicum of vision, of imagination, and of real sympathy.

I read in *The Manchester Guardian* a trenchant letter from Sir George Arthur, which I feel constrained to quote in full:

“To think all this might have been prevented and precious lives saved by

earlier action is too frightful," so wrote Queen Victoria when Khartum fell. "The reason why the Nile Expedition was sanctioned too late was that Mr. Gladstone would not accept simple evidence of a plain fact which was patent to much less powerful intellects than his own." Such was Lord Cromer's comment on the disaster which for thirteen years stained our history.

To the recent superb gallantry and amazing efficiency of the Forces of the Crown full publicity has been rightly given. Before what tribunal will stand the Ministers—among whom the present Prime Minister is a shining exception—who year in, year out, and for purely political reasons deliberately turned a deaf ear to the solemn warnings and

earnest entreaties of the soldiers whose intellects may have been less profound but whose vision was infinitely clearer ?

It is the century-old story : procrastination and parsimony in the Cabinet, to be atoned for by blood and agony in the field.

Sir George Arthur is thinking of the soldiers, as well he may. But I am thinking of the way in which India is ruled, honestly, of course, ably, of course, and with a great devotion to duty. But with how little insight into the spirit of the ruled, into the real aspirations of the people : with how little true

understanding of the Indian temperament, and with still less realization of the great way in which the existing situation might be handled.

I may go too far. Indian leaders may go too far. But it is almost worse not to go nearly far enough. It is worse to have no spirit to take a risk in order, maybe, to grasp a wonderful opportunity. The risk is little so far as India is concerned, for she is essentially a great country, and extraordinarily quick to appreciate even a small measure of understanding. And in the last resort she has supreme reverence for law and order.

**BRITAIN AND INDIA TOGETHER**

But there have been solemn warnings enough and earnest entreaties enough to have moved His Majesty's Government many times over, and each time a pronouncement is made I have a tremendous hope, invariably followed by a tremendous disappointment. I well know the preoccupations of Britain at the present time, and I would be the last to embarrass her. But I also am supremely intent on winning the war, and I know that if India were only moved by a most generous, yet most righteous, declaration, victory would be in sight.



How well I know the deep anxiety of Dr. Besant that Britain should without delay do her duty to India. How well I know her intense eagerness that the Indo-British connection should be maintained at all costs, even at the cost of India having to wait for her undoubted rights. How well I know her immense efforts to frame, and gain acceptance for, a Constitution entirely Indian in its nature. But how well I know also her selfless eagerness to scrap her own Constitutional formulæ for any others upon which Indian leaders might in a majority be agreed. She did so scrap her Commonwealth of India Bill,

But neither Britain nor India were ready for this messenger of the Gods. To all intents and purposes India rejected her, and Britain, through the Government of Madras, actually had the temerity to intern her! But it must at least be said to the credit of India, and to Mr. Gandhi's—who otherwise was a constant obstacle in her way, he finds it difficult to support anyone else but himself—that the Madras Government could not keep her interned for long, for three months only. But imagine this great friend both of Britain and India being interned at all! What crass

stupidity, to say nothing of ingratitude !

Dr. Besant was ever Britain's and India's best friend, but both were blind, and for both the great opportunity to build a mighty Commonwealth of free peoples passed away.

#### THE OPPORTUNITY NOW

The opportunity has returned sooner than any of us could dream it might. It is with us today and now. It has come in the wake of the war, and I pray to God that it may not again be rejected as it was a quarter of a century ago. I pray that Britain may not reject

it. I pray that India may not reject it.

I wrote in the beginning of this article that in the earlier years of my association with India India grew closer to me, and Britain less close. Perhaps this was inevitable with a young and impetuous heart which could only see one goal at a time and must concentrate on it to the exclusion of all other goals.

But I am older now, and perhaps a little wiser. My love for India is greater than it has ever been, greater than in my youth. But Britain has come no less close to me, and I think I may truly say that I do not now know which

land is more dear. I believe that the resurrection of my love for my physical-plane Motherland is in some measure due to my amazement at her courage and heroism during the course of the present war. Words fail me to describe my enthusiasm for the fact that the eternal spirit of Britain, manifest in her Great through the ages of her existence, has once again descended upon her to make her invincible against foes she has often met before and has always conquered.

India is her only problem, unless we have still to regard Ireland—the India of the West, as once she was, as perhaps she still is—as

another grave preoccupation. She can solve this problem, and she must.

One consideration weighs with me more and more as I find myself becoming increasingly occupied with what is called politics, but which in its present nature is nothing more than the honest service of the State that she may be true to herself in all her life. If I try to work for her freedom as I understand her freedom I feel I am not working politically as in a party but as one who has felt himself face to face with the real India and is ardent that this real India shall vibrate throughout her present

being. Let this be politics if you will, but to me it is life.

And at this most critical juncture in the mightiest clash the world has ever known between spiritual freedom and brute force, I find myself able to think of little else than of Britain, fortified by all the other members of her Commonwealth, upright, heroic, blessed in sacrifice, standing alone, yes alone, on the side of freedom, resolute to repel and utterly to crush the brute force that would hurl the whole world back into an age of barbarism.

Be her weaknesses what they may, be her approach to one or

more of her problems visionless, even small-minded, there she stands, a little island, the last refuge of freedom and justice and peace throughout the world—the last refuge, the world's remaining hope.

I know well that Britain's policy towards India should without delay undergo a radical change. I know well that her present attitude is inexcusable. I know well that her statesmen are this very moment being weighed in the balance as to their power to realize that as they open wide the gates of freedom to India, so do they strengthen Britain into impregnability before



the forces of evil. I know well that as yet this power is lacking. And I know well that her statesmen have so far been found wanting in that that they have failed Britain, India and the world in a vital issue, and that their failure brings us all into the gravest danger.

But I know well also that the leaders of India are themselves being weighed in the balance as to their power to realize that at all costs India must stand, with the whole of her resources of soul and of material, by Britain's side against the universal foe, difficult as such an attitude has been made

for them by Britain for any leader save one who is utterly dedicated to his country in a spirit of the widest selflessness. I know well also that so to stand is indeed India's greatest service to herself, and that India's leaders have, at this moment, the glorious, but none the less difficult, opportunity—it will pass away if they do not seize it soon—of giving to their Motherland a gift even more splendid, if possible, than Swaraj: the gift of life itself in place of that death which will surely come to her if Britain falls because India withholds from her, however understandably, her precious help. How

terrible a mockery to demand Swaraj for an India doomed to death because she stood aloof, albeit justifiably, from the one country in the world which now is wondrously content to endure all things and to suffer all things that freedom shall not pass away, nor justice, from the children of God upon His earth.

### **MY HEART IS SET . . .**

Even if Britain fails to seize the lofty opportunity of her duty to India—a duty to herself no less—nevertheless she has seized a supreme opportunity in ranging herself on the side of Freedom and

Justice against the forces of evil,  
So my heart is set :

1. On Britain and her brother nations, among which I, of course, include India, decisively winning the war. If the whole world is not to be thrown back into an age-long period of barbarism Britain and her brother nations *must* win the war.

I know they will. But will they take long to reach a decisive victory, or will they win speedily ?

2. On India throwing herself with all her immense spiritual force into the great fight between darkness and Light, so as to make the victory come speedily. Once India is awakened both to the gravity

and to the opportunity of the situation as these directly affect her, she will stake her soul on the side of Right, as Britain and her other brother nations have staked their souls.

And then India's material resources as well as her man-power will flow into the fight, just as Britain and her other brother nations are giving their all in men, money and material because the soul of each has so ordained.

3. On Britain making a great act of recognition with regard to India's right to self-determination, calling upon the Indian people through their leaders to fashion the

Charter-Constitution of their Liberties, and by asking them to rally round the King-Emperor as he leads the fight for the freedom of the world. His Majesty's name would ring throughout the world, and would go down into history as one of the greatest builders of civilization, were he to be able to make an epoch-stirring announcement of his royal recognition of India's right. What soul-stirring joy there would be throughout India! What a warmth of comradeship would be aroused between the eastern and the western divisions of the world-wide Commonwealth!

What a miraculous release there would be of India's as yet untapped power—spiritual and material!

What a crushing blow to all enemies of Right throughout the world!

4. On France, Holland, Belgium, Poland, Finland, Norway, Denmark, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Albania, Abyssinia, and all other countries devastated by Germany and Italy, once more rejoicing in Freedom, in Justice, in Happiness, and in the free pursuit of the destinies divinely appointed for them.

5. On the United States of America entering the war. Already the hearts of the people of the

United States beat strongly for the Right. Already they have given precious help.

But there must be one Brotherhood for the Right throughout the world, as there is already an axis for the wrong. No such Brotherhood can be complete, even though it can be effective, without the active and full comradeship of the American people. For their own future, to ensure its greatness as their past has been so great, they must help to make the victory speedy, as no less must India.

6. On the release of China from her present agonies. China has yet a great role to play in the coming



world civilization, and Japan cannot and shall not prevent her from so doing, even though, to its shame, the rest of the world has stood idly by while China has suffered, and in some cases has even helped Japan with material for China's destruction while giving lip-sympathy to China for her preservation. There are too many countries in the world standing idly by while their own safety is being won by the sacrifices and sufferings of other countries.

7. On the pursuit of Happiness, as the American Declaration of Independence so nobly states, being the great objective of all, not in a

spirit of selfishness nor of personal gain, but that all shall be happy without distinction of race, nation, creed, colour, caste, class, or kingdom of nature.

To this end, there must come about a change of heart in every individual and a searching challenge of all his modes of living in will, in mind, in feelings and emotions, in convictions and opinions, in speech and action.

If the world is to be happy the world must change, for it is not happy, and perhaps has never been happy. Hence the wars. Hence the supreme conflict of these present times.

We may need a League of Nations. We may need a United States of Europe. We may need a Federation of the Free Nations of the world. We may need an Indo-British Commonwealth. We may need a great Federation of the Nations composing the Americas.

But above all we need, the world needs, a change of heart in every individual himself, and in every collection of individuals constituting a faith, a nation, a race.

Thus is my heart inclined. May it ever beat so as to be worthy of the changing times !

**NICENESS**

But I must return to that consideration which has been so much impressing itself upon me during my public work in India. It is that everywhere there are so many really nice people, whose niceness only becomes apparent as we come to know them. They are nice entirely independent of our relations towards them. We may be their uncompromising foes in public life, and we may accuse them of faithlessness to the country they think they serve. We may be quite brutal as we fight them. But, if we know them, we like them, and doubtless respect

them, too, for their sincerity and devotion.

I remember how nice I thought the C.I.D. officers who came to notify Dr. Besant, Mr. Wadia and myself in 1917 of our internment. I remember having quite a pleasant little conversation with them. I remember how nice to meet were the political opponents we had to chastise in *New India*. I remember with what a shock, almost of surprise, I found those people to be nice whose political iniquities I dubbed as monstrous.

It is the same now. I have present occasion to belabour the Congress and to find fault with most

of its works. But how nice are its individual members. Of course, I shall be told that this niceness is only a veneer put on for the occasion. Perhaps it is, but perhaps if I am discovered also to be nice, this too may be a veneer of similar nature. No, I think we will not try to probe deeply into the natures of others, but will take them at a face value which may go far deeper than some cynics would have us believe. And I must say that I like my foes quite as much as I like most of my friends.

It is one of our modern tragedies that we tend to misjudge and dislike

people whom we do not know. If we paid less attention to the setting of them and more attention to themselves, we should almost invariably like them. We Theosophists, for example, are very much nicer people than those people think who do not take the trouble to know a little about us personally. All kinds of highly ridiculous tales are abroad about us, and none of them true. We are just like other people, only different, just as the Protestants or the Roman Catholics are just like other people, only different. And it is the difference that looms so large, with the essential brotherhood looming so

small. It is not agreement with each other's views that matters, but the fact we are all equal children of the Father. And while we may differ from one another, and may feel constrained to arraign one another for our differences, and to declare that we are right and those are wrong who differ from us, we ought never to forget that we shall like very much indeed these others when we come to know them, we shall feel we have acquired real friends.

I feel very much friendship with many of the Congress. I disagree profoundly with Gandhiji. I think he is often "wrong." But I have a



deep admiration for him, and only wish I could know him far better than I do. So do I feel towards many of the Congress leaders. So many of them I know to be most honest men and women, no less intent than I upon the service of the Motherland.

Whenever I have occasion to meet some European civilian, or perhaps member of the business world, I immediately discover how nice he is, even though I may abhor his views. And I am very glad to count him among my friends.

I do not think that the Roman Catholic or the Protestant fraternity in the least degree understand

how friendly we Theosophists feel towards them, and how much we appreciate their sincerity and devotion and fineness of living. For my part I have a very profound reverence for His Holiness the Pope, and the gorgeous and immensely effective Roman Catholic ceremonial stirs me deeply. But I am unable to contact these brethren because they think that my views are an insuperable barrier to any real friendship, or they may think that I deem their views to be insurmountable barriers. By no means, so far as I am concerned. As a Theosophist I have learned to have sincere respect for the convictions

of others, however much I may feel it my duty emphatically to express my own. I do so wish we could come together more, and be nearer to one another, however different may be our various outlooks upon life. If we all were to judge a little less and to understand a little more, how much happier we and the whole world would be. It is this proneness to judgment without really knowing the facts that keeps us apart and mutually antagonistic.

#### AN URGENT PROBLEM

I am almost beginning to believe that India herself will not know that unity which is so essential to

the release of her nationhood until she comes face to face with some major danger before which there must be a truce to all differences and an absolutely common endeavour to avert it. This would bring us all together, no matter to what faith or race or political party we might belong. We should be compelled to merge our differences in the common need. Is the war to continue until something happens to startle India out of her disunity? Must the war go on until India is forced by external circumstances to end a disruption which she is otherwise too weak to end? Is there no means for us to come

together in some way, in some form of greatest common measure, unless compulsion be applied to us? Speaking the other day at my lecture on "India and the War" in Bangalore, Sir C. V. Raman insisted that there was need for the bombing of Indian cities so that the urgency for India's wholehearted participation in it might be brought home to her as it could not be brought home to her in any other way. I am beginning to wonder if there be any truth in this alarming statement. Must there be an invasion of India before India will wake up to the urgency of solidarity if she is to become

the free nation of the dreams of us all?

Must an enemy appear before us in order that we may know the Brotherhood that ever unites us?

I pray not. But look at India—how divided she is in her political life, in her religious life, in her social life. See the disunity in Hinduism. See the disunity in Christianity, a faith divided against itself, with its many sects to all intents and purposes at war with one another, and each claiming to be the only true Christian faith. Look at the political field. How disastrously is India a house divided

against herself in this department of her life.

What can we do, while retaining those differences which are so many different ways of righteous living, as there are so many colours of the sunlight, to establish in this rainbow land a Greatest Common Measure of co-operation and understanding?

This is a far more urgent problem than the problem of India's self-government, important though this may be, and all men and women of goodwill must tackle it with the least possible delay.

What can we do in every field of Indian life—in religion, in

politics, in Indian defence, in education, in industry, and everywhere else ?

For my part, I am most eager to do all I can, and I am pondering deeply over the question as to how we may all come together to make a common cause amidst our differences. Differences must rightly separate, but no less must they enrich us all, and the present war is, I am sure, a lesson to us to learn that only on the basis of mutual understanding and heartfelt co-operation can the world be made safe from war.









